

Chapter 8 Historic Resources

Introduction

The City of Harrisonburg has a rich history and retains many quality historic resources. Citizens recognize these resources, particularly those downtown and in close-by neighborhoods, as providing much of the City's unique architectural character. The City has not made historic preservation a major focus, but interest in preservation is growing.

Background

The Plan Background Information Supplement contains a five-page brief history of the City as well as listings of the City's historic resources surveyed to date. The reader is directed to the supplement to find this more detailed information.

Harrisonburg's Historic Assets and Previous Survey Efforts

Harrisonburg is fortunate that, while many historic resources have been lost, many historic properties still remain to tell the story of the City's rich history and to enrich the lives of its citizens. Beginning in 1958, these properties have been documented through historic sites surveys, providing the City with an invaluable inventory of its historic resources.

In 1958, the national HABS (Historic American Buildings Survey) inventory recorded the more prominent buildings in the City. Several additional buildings were added to the inventory by Isaac Terrall in 1972 during his survey of historic sites in Rockingham County. These early surveys included very little photographic documentation and lacked adequate written information for evaluating the properties. In addition, a number of these buildings have been destroyed over the years.

A more detailed survey of the downtown was undertaken in 1981 by Ann McCleary for the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission (VHLC) (VHLC is now the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (VDHR)) at the request of the Harrisonburg Downtown Development Corporation. This survey recorded 296 buildings and sites in sufficient detail to allow recommendations for the preservation of the downtown's architecturally and historically significant properties.

The remainder of the City was surveyed by Ms. McCleary in 1983-84 as part of a Rockingham County survey, including numerous individual buildings in the newly annexed portion of Harrisonburg, mostly farmsteads. During the summer of 1984, Ms. McCleary also surveyed 25 buildings in the historic core of the JMU campus. Both of these surveys were compiled into a 1985 VHLC-published survey report entitled, "The Valley Regional Preservation Plan: Evaluation of Architectural, Historic, and Archaeological Resources in Harrisonburg, Virginia." The report noted that surveyed properties are concentrated largely in the downtown area and on the JMU campus, and recommended further survey work concentrating on the late 19th and early 20th century residential neighborhoods surrounding the downtown core including: High Street, East and West Market Street, Mason and Main Streets, Franklin and Newman Streets, the neighborhoods west of High Street, and on the north side of the downtown. Ms. McCleary also recommended that a future survey document significant older houses within the many modern subdivisions on the fringes of the older City.

At that time, the survey also listed four City properties on the Virginia Landmarks Register and National Register of Historic Places, including the Thomas Harrison House, the Anthony Hockman House, the Joshua Wilton House, and the County Courthouse. One property, the Morrison House, was noted as removed from the Register after its recent demolition.

Ms. McCleary indicated that the low number of registered buildings was not indicative of the City's architectural fabric and listed 11 additional downtown buildings as potentially eligible for the state and national registers, including Church of the Brethren, the Ney House, the old First National Bank, Rockingham County Office Building, Rockingham Motor Company, the Newman/Ruddle Building, the Isaac Atkins House, the L & S Diner, Crystal Service (no longer existing), the Chesapeake and Western Railroad Station, and the Craft (Higgins) House. The McCleary survey also included a list of architecturally significant buildings in the downtown study area meriting rehabilitation and/or preservation. The report recommended that the 52 buildings on this list be preserved in their settings to help retain their historic character. A thematic nomination to the register was recommended for railroad-related sites, including the historic warehouses along the tracks. In addition, JMU's original campus was recommended for the Virginia and National Registers as a historic district.

VDHR records show three individually surveyed historic buildings, besides the Morrison House, have been demolished since the 1985 survey report, including the Bassford House on North Liberty Street, the Jehu Bear House on South Main Street and the Henry Ott House at 254 Newman Avenue. It also noted the loss of the house of Reuben Harrison, Thomas Harrison's son, in 1982. In addition, many other structures were lost during the 1960's Urban Renewal Program, which cleared blighted areas all over the country for redevelopment. One of the oldest houses in the City, the Henry Ott House (1858) was destroyed by fire in 1975.

In 1983, the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission recommended that the Harrisonburg Post Office be registered. This imposing Georgian Revival building was constructed in 1939. The United States Postal Service never acted to pursue listing of this building on the historic registers.

The next effort at cataloguing the City's historic resources came in 1987, when Land & Community Associates completed a survey of the JMU campus as part of a State-Owned Properties Statewide Survey. This survey listed 36 sites in and around the original quadrangle, including the quadrangle itself. The survey notes that JMU provides the earliest examples of architect Charles Robinson's campus planning for Virginia's colleges, being the first state normal school designed by him. Construction following his original Beaux-Arts scheme occurred between 1908 and 1940. This survey agreed with the McCleary recommendation that the original JMU campus was eligible for the Virginia and National Landmarks.

A list of the survey records from Harrisonburg, on file with the VDHR, is included in the Plan Background Information Supplement. There are 483 standard VDHR files, plus 24 additional survey files prepared by the Virginia Department of Transportation for transportation construction projects and to catalogue Harrisonburg's bridges. Missing from this list are the

survey files for the 1981 downtown survey, which was done in blocks and assigned survey numbers 115-0027 through 115-0053.

Historic Preservation Efforts

Harrisonburg was the last county seat in the Shenandoah Valley from Winchester to Lexington and the last City or town between Winchester and Staunton to have a State or National Register-designated district. All of this survey work has left Harrisonburg with a wealth of information on its historic assets and many recommendations for measures to ensure that these resources are protected for future generations.

Listing on the Virginia and National Registers brings no regulatory requirements for property owners, but makes the properties eligible for state and federal tax credits for rehabilitation of historic structures within the district. It also requires state and federal agencies to avoid actions that might harm historic structures within the district. Properties within historic districts also tend to appreciate in value at a faster rate than other properties, providing benefits to historic property owners and to the community's tax base.

There have been several efforts to establish districts within the City. The VDHR worked with Harrisonburg on two separate districts during the late 1990s. In September 1995, the Planning and Community Development Department submitted a Preliminary Information Request application for VDHR to determine if a proposed Court Square Historic District would be eligible for listing on the Virginia and National Registers. The proposed district encompassed 35 acres including the original town boundaries around Court Square, as well as along both sides of Main Street from Gay Street on the north and to the JMU campus on the south. The proposed district included residential, commercial and governmental buildings dating from the 1870s to the 1930s. It was the stated intent of the proposed district to encourage property owners to take pride in the historic character of the area, to make these properties eligible for state and federal tax incentives for restoration and rehabilitation, and to help preserve the buildings for future generations.

In February 1996, VDHR determined that the proposed district was eligible for listing on the Virginia and National Registers. The Committee for Downtown Harrisonburg requested that the City pursue the designation, but some downtown property owners expressed concern about possible future restrictions on their property. The City Council decided not to nominate the district to the registers.

In October of 1997, the City of Harrisonburg submitted a Preliminary Information Form application for a second proposed historic district, the Old Town Historic District. The Old Town neighborhood, located between downtown and JMU, has long served as a prominent residential area and includes many fine homes dating from the early 1900s. The proposed district was bounded on the north by the 200 block of East Water Street, on the east by the east side of Ott Street, on the south by the northern side of Cantrell Avenue, and on the west by South Main Street. In April 1998, the VDHR Review Board determined that the Old Town Historic District would be eligible for listing on the Virginia and National Registers. A group of neighborhood residents worked on completing survey forms on all of the structures within the proposed district, and by November 1999 had 81 forms completed. The survey work was never completed.

Following the two surveys of the JMU campus in the 1980s, little effort was made to nominate the campus to the Virginia and National Registers until 2002, when students in a JMU History class tried to pursue the designation with the JMU Administration. No action has been taken by JMU to date to complete the nomination process. As of 2002, however, the Governor has a new memorandum of agreement with VDHR to encourage more State-owned properties to be listed on the National Register.

The Harrisonburg-Rockingham County Historical Society, located in Dayton, provides a wealth of additional information relating to Harrisonburg's history. In 1995, the Society launched a major initiative to become the finest regional historical society in the Commonwealth. This led to a new 5,000 square-foot exhibit on Rockingham County history, the expansion of its Shenandoah Valley folk art collection, re-engineering of its electric map on Stonewall Jackson's Shenandoah Valley Campaign, and significant additions to its genealogy library. It also maintains an extensive photographic collection.

A recent historic preservation effort in the City was directed at the rehabilitation and expansion of the Lucy F. Simms School on Simms Avenue, which is now known as the Lucy F. Simms Center for Continuing Education. A nomination of this historic City school to the Virginia and National Registers was submitted and approved by the Virginia Landmarks Commission.

In 2003, Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance formed a Historic District Advisory Committee to consider the advantages and disadvantages of creating a downtown historic district. The committee was composed of City and property owner representatives. After months of meetings and consultation with the Department of Historic Resources and other communities in the state, the group recommended application for a historic district with the understanding that Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance would not advocate for the creation of a local historic district and architecture review board in the future. In 2004, the City contracted with Landmark Preservation Associates to conduct the architectural survey and submit the nominations forms. In December 2004, the Downtown Historic District was designated a Virginia Historic Landmark, and in January 2005, the district was listed in the National Register for Historic Places.

Following more than a year of discussion and meetings between representatives of Old Town, Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance, and the Department of Historic Resources, the decision was made by Old Town residents to contract with Sabe Preservation Consulting to conduct the architectural survey and submit the nomination forms to create a historic district. In September 2007, the Old Town Historic District was placed in the Virginia Landmarks Register, and then in February 2008, the district was entered into the National Register of Historic Places.

Potential for Future Historic Preservation Efforts

The City has had extensive survey and district preparation work completed over the past 20 years, which helped to lay the groundwork for the creation of the two historic district designations. This information provides a rich resource for those interested in the City's fascinating history, as well as a strong foundation for future preservation efforts.

Many communities have realized their historic buildings not only provide a link to their past, but also a powerful economic asset. Cities such as Staunton and Lexington have had great success using the National Main Street Center's Main Street approach to downtown revitalization, which is a proven comprehensive program for enhancing historic downtown commercial areas. An average of \$25.00 is reinvested in the community for every \$1 spent on Main Street programs nationwide.¹

The National Main Street program offers a four-point approach through community driven, comprehensive strategies to revitalize downtowns and neighborhood business districts. The four points include: organization, promotion, design, and economic restructuring. These four points are also accompanied by eight strategies for communities to utilize in their revitalization efforts. In recognition of the great potential of the Main Street approach to assist Harrisonburg in enhancing its downtown, Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance pursued a Main Street revitalization program for the City's historic core and achieved this designation in August 2004. Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance, initiated by City Council in April 2002, is developing a comprehensive vision and master plan to revitalize downtown Harrisonburg based on the Main Street four-point approach. Rehabilitation of historic buildings to enhance the physical appearance of the district is one of the major strategies of the Main Street approach.

Rehabilitation of historic buildings creates local jobs and generates local sales for specialized construction materials. Rehabilitated buildings in traditional downtowns are great locations for the small businesses that drive local economies, because their sizes lend themselves to a variety of smaller retail and office spaces. In many cities, they also have become magnets for incubator businesses, such as the Rosetta Stone language learning software company in downtown Harrisonburg that was started by a JMU professor and his family. Harrisonburg's historic buildings provide significant opportunities for such innovative business development.

Historic downtowns have a character that is conducive to tourism and entertainment businesses that can draw revenues from outside of the City as well. Well-preserved downtowns increase the quality of life of the community and help in attracting and retaining new business and industry. All of these benefits also translate into higher tax revenues for the community through higher real property values, higher transient occupancy taxes and higher sales tax revenues. Beyond these benefits, the preservation of the community's historic assets ensures that its history is understood and protected and provides an important context for new development that will respect and enhance the existing community, rather than make it just another "Anytown, U.S.A."

With the creation of the historic districts, one concern is the real and potential loss of contributing buildings to demolition. Not only can this compromise the historic character of downtown and residential neighborhoods, but if too many buildings are demolished, it could lead to the de-designation of the historic districts and the accompanying loss of tax credits for rehabilitating historic buildings. This concern must be balanced with the interests of maintaining property rights and avoiding over regulation.

Although not located within the City's downtown, one of the City's historic landmarks recently received a significant improvement. The Turner Ashby Monument, maintained by the United

¹ The National Main Street Center web site: www.mainstreet.org

Daughters of the Confederacy, was accessible from a private street off of Port Republic Road, but is now accessible from Turner Ashby Lane; a public cul-de-sac street, completed in early 2009, which intersects Neff Avenue between Port Republic Road and Reservoir Street. The improvements include better parking options and offer visitors and tourists a more user friendly entrance to the monument.

Historic Resources Goals, Objectives and Strategies

Goal 6. To celebrate the City's heritage and preserve and protect its historic resources as essential elements of the City's economic health, aesthetic character, and sense of place.

Objective 6.1 To disseminate information about the history and historic resources of the City of Harrisonburg.

Strategy 6.1.1 To make the Visitor Center and gift shop operated by the Harrisonburg Tourism & Visitor Services, in the historic Hardesty-Higgins House, a sales outlet for historical publications and a source of information on the historic resources and sites in the City.

Strategy 6.1.2 To create a partnership between the Harrisonburg Tourism & Visitor Services and the Massanutten Regional Library to develop a historical research section in the library to which visitors to the Hardesty-Higgins House Visitors Center could be referred.

Strategy 6.1.3 To develop a walking tour of historic sites in downtown Harrisonburg with appropriate brochures and signage, such tour to begin at the Hardesty-Higgins House visitors center.

Strategy 6.1.4 To seek establishment of the Hardesty-Higgins House visitors center or other site in the City as the visitor orientation center for the Cross Keys/Port Republic Civil War Battlefields Cluster in cooperation with the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation.

Objective 6.2 To promote and recognize quality historic preservation projects.

Strategy 6.2.1 To partner with the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Historical Society to implement an annual preservation awards program to recognize quality preservation projects.

Objective 6.3 To establish historic districts.

Strategy 6.3.1 To work with local groups and the Department of Historic Resources to seek designation of historic districts in such areas as:

- Residential neighborhoods adjacent to the Downtown Historic District;
- James Madison University historic campus (in collaboration with JMU)

- Strategy 6.3.2 To seek funding from the Department of Historic Resources for survey work and assistance with National Register Historic District nominations.
- Strategy 6.3.3 To explore the option of passing an ordinance that would require approval from City Council before a demolition permit is granted or before architectural changes are made to a contributing building in a historic district.
- Objective 6.4 To conserve City-owned historic resources and to ensure that City development projects respect and reflect the historic character of the City and site context.
 - Strategy 6.4.1 To catalogue all City-owned properties that have historic value.
 - Strategy 6.4.2 To adopt policies for treatment of City-owned historic properties (maintenance, renovation, additions, and conditions when demolition is warranted) so as to preserve their historic value.
 - Strategy 6.4.3 To take advantage of federal and state historic rehabilitation tax credits by partnering with the private sector on City property rehabilitation projects.
 - Strategy 6.4.4 To assess and mitigate the impacts of all City projects on adjacent historic resources and areas.
 - Strategy 6.4.5 To design new City public facilities so that they respect and complement the historic character of the City and site context.
 - Strategy 6.4.6 To develop a plan to renovate the Municipal Building consistent with its historic character.